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ABSTRACT

Attrition among students in adult basic and secondary education programs has been a perennial problem. Conducting research on this population is also problematic once they have dropped out of a program. A study surveyed 76 dropouts and 35 General Educational Development (GED) program completers from two large, multisite programs about factors influencing their continued participation in their program. Chi-squares were computed between the two groups on 14 reasons negatively affecting program attendance. Four demographic variables also were described. Results indicated that self-reported reasons for attrition of the dropout group were largely situational (trouble getting to class, child care problems, job responsibilities) rather than institutional or dispositional, following Cross's typology of barriers to participation in all forms of adult education programs. The major institutional reason given was the need for more individual attention. The GED completers cited many of the same problems, and, in fact, the only items on which the differences of the two groups were statistically significant were "trouble getting to class" and "stopped due to sickness." Three pages of references are included. (Author/KC)

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# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ATTRITION OF ADULT BASIC AND SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Attrition among students in adult basic and secondary education programs has been a perennial problem. Conducting research on this population is also problematic once they have dropped out of a program. This research surveyed 76 dropouts and 35 GED completers from two large, multi-site programs as to factors influencing their continued participation in their program. Chi-squares were computed between the two groups on 14 reasons negatively affecting program attendance. Four demographic variables were also described. Results indicated that self-reported reasons for attrition of the dropout group were largely situational (trouble getting to class, childcare problems, job responsibilities) rather than institutional or dispositional, in Cross's typology of barriers to participation in all forms of adult education programs. The major institutional reason given was the need for more individual attention. The GED completers cited many of the same problems, and, in fact, the only items on which the differences of the two groups were statistically significant were "trouble getting to class" and "stopped due to sickness."

# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ATTRITION OF ADULT BASIC AND SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENTS

## Background

Practitioner observation as well as published research have long recognized that attracting the high school equivalency (GED) and especially the adult basic education (ABE) student is a perennial challenge to administrators and teachers in adult basic and secondary educatin (ABSE) programs. Mark (1983) has estimated that less than 2.1 million are enrolled nationally in ABSE and tutorial programs (including Laubach and Literacy Volunteers of America). Based on census data as of March 1983 (The World Almanac, [1985]), there were 45 million adults 18 and older, or 27%, who had less than high school credentials. Thus combining Mark's estimate with the census data, the national participation rate could be estimated at 4.6%. Certainly many of the eligible population are older adults, but their passing will by no means eliminate the problem of the undereducated adult, as current non-high school completion rates of 28% (Bell, 1984) insure that ABSE programs will have a clientele for the foreseeable future.

Attracting the ABSE student is hampered by issues both of access and learner disposition; for example, Fitzgerald (1984) found unhappiness with existing programs, shame,

lack of motivation, and drinking-drug problems to be the main reasons for non-participation among her 100 interviewees. Pursuing the same question based on 1,680 telephone surveys, Kreitlow, Glustrom, and Martin (1981) have noted that the three main reasons for non-participation are age, functioning satisfactorily without a high school diploma, and the poverty of life circumstance. More generally, Cross (1981) has categorized barriers to participation in various adult educational settings as situational (costs, time or transportation problems, home or job responsibilities) dispositional (don't enjoy school, afraid I'm too old, anxiety about ability), and institutional (too much red tape, attendance requirements, scheduling). It might plausibly be inferred that the impact of these barriers is likely to be exacerbated among the potential ABE/GED clientele. Cross also notes that the best predictor of participation in adult education is previous educational level, a fact which is hardly propitious in attracting the undereducated adult.

Many of the problems present in attracting students to ABSE programs are also present in retaining them once they have made the often difficult decision to enroll. As Boshier (1973) has observed, "dropout is in some ways an extension of non-participation; variables associated with

one are associated with the other" (p. 256). If the decision to participate is highly tentative, whether due to institutional, situational, or dispositional barriers, those problems will often persist and become reasons for dropping out, particularly if no counterbalancing reasons for continuing participation occur while the student is enrolled. Participation in ABSE programs, it hardly needs to be said, is not only a matter of attraction of students, but also one of retention of them. Examining why they drop out once they are enrolled is thus an issue of critical concern.

A number of studies have pursued the problem. One approach has been to seek personality characteristics which are then correlated with attrition or persistence. Boshier (1973), for example, has noted that "participation and dropout stem from an interaction of internal psychological and external environmental variables" (p. 256). Concerned with the "congruence" between self and ideal self, Boshier concludes that incongruence between self and ideal self leads to self-environment incongruence, ultimately leading to dropout, whereas self-ideal self congruence relates to self-environment congruence, which in turn contributes to persistence. Another study by Wilson (1980) has pursued the relation of self-description to attrition-persistence.

Wilson, using Cough's Adjective Check List (ACL), sought to predict dropouts vs. persisters. He found that of the 24 ACL variables, 116 persisters scored higher on self-control, endurance, and deference whereas 29 dropouts were higher in number of unfavorable adjectives checked, autonomy, change, and succorance.

Other psychological approaches have included Donnarumma, Cox, and Beder (1980), who found, based on an N of 40, that GED passers were more field independent (analytical and logical) while GED failers were more field dependent (incorporating more external referents in information processing). Field independence, they also found, was correlated with higher math and reading scores as measured by both the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and the GED. Using a modification of the Rotter I-E Scale, Newsom and Foxworth (1980) and Taylor and Boss (1985) found a relationship between locus of control and dropout. Externally controlled ABSE students, who tend to believe that their lives are largely controlled by fate, chance, or powerful others, were significantly more likely to drop out than internally controlled students, who felt that their own actions primarily determined the course of their lives. Another approach exploring psychological variables was that of Killian (1969), who used the

California Test of Personality in a learning laboratory situation and found that dropouts scored significantly lower than persisters on "social adjustment" and "total adjustment" scales.

Other studies have been less concerned with personality traits and more concerned with demographic or environmental variables, or with academic ability. For example, Weisel (1980) found that lower reading, math, and spelling scores were characteristic of the high risk student. Similarly, Sainty (1971) found lower scores on vocabulary and reading comprehension, speed, and accuracy to be significantly related to dropout. A seemingly anomalous finding of Garrison (1985) that dropouts tended to have firmer goals was explained in terms of academic skill; "It was suspected that many students with lower scholastic ability had unrealistic expectaitons of their courses which would result in dropout when the reality of the academic demands were [sic] realized" (p. 34).

Demographic and environmental factors have attracted much attention in attrition research. Several studies (Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984; Londoner, 1972; Sainty, 1971; Shipp, Jackson, & Skeen, 1978; Weisel, 1980) have noted a relationship between youth and attrition. Other variables examined have included work (Boshier, 1973; Meyer, 1974),

health (Meyer, 1974), social support (Jones, Schulman, & Stubblefield, 1978), and ethnicity (Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984; Shipp et al., 1978).

One might generalize that approaches to attrition research have fallen into three broad categories: studies based on some form of personality testing of students, often with the goal of predicting propensity for dropout; studies seeking relationships between demographic and academic variables and attrition/persistence; and studies seeking information directly from the students themselves, particularly focusing on reasons for persistence and/or attrition. Of the last, Garry (1975) observes, "Research of this type seems to be based on the availability of the dropout, therefore it is fairly scarce. However this type of research is extremely useful in providing clues for dropout behavior" (p. 22). In fact, once students have dropped out, they are no longer an <u>in situ</u> group which obviously complicates research on them. The study undertaken here is of this type, yet it is unusual in its relatively large number of dropouts surveyed. Several of the studies cited here had Ns of far less than 100 of which as few as 16 might actually be dropouts.

Psychological studies of dropout behavior can have an additional problem: the educationally disadvantaged adult

may not have the reading skills to handle the instruments. This problem increases in importance when subjects' reading comprehension is at the lower grade levels. For example, Rolfe and Wilson (1979) achieve impressive results with the Adjective Check List in predicting GED-level dropouts and persisters, but its use of such adjectives as "blustery," "fickle," and "persevering" would hardly be appropriate for the ABE-level student. Clearly compatibility between instruments and the academic ability of the student, especially the ABE student, cannot be ignored. The present study obviated both of these problems by surveying a comparatively large number of dropouts and a smaller number of GED completers from two large, multi-site programs using an 18-item questionnaire designed for the ABE-level student.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were 111 individuals from two large, multi-site ABSE programs conducted by two southern junior colleges during the academic year 1985-86. Of the 111, 76 were students who had dropped out of their program for at least four consecutive weeks after enrolling, while 35 were students who had taken and successfully completed their GED. The programs encompass both rural and metropolitan

areas and include a total of 34 sites in a 10 county area. The overall programs enrolled 718 students, employed 37 teachers, and used both tutorial and group methods in both day and night classes. Dropouts were predominantly female (79%) and black (60%), with a mean age of 29.3 (range: 15-62), and a mean of 9.5 years of formal schooling (range: 6-12). GED completers were also predominantly female (88%) and black (53%), with a mean age of 31.4 (range: 17-55) and a mean of 9.4 years of formal schooling (range: 1-12).

Procedures

A short two-part questionnaire requesting age, sex, race, and last school grade completed and listing 14 factors inhibiting attendance in the ABSE program was designed by the researchers and submitted to a panel of 15 ABE teachers and students for the purpose of establishing face validity. It was modified on the basis of the panel's responses. The 14 factors included on the questionnaire were derived from reasons given in previous dropout research as well as the authors' experience with this population. A progression response format was adopted for the 14 attendance items with "no" denoting that the item was not a factor inhibiting attendance, "sometimes" that it was occasionally, and "yes" indicating that it was a continuous problem. Using the Gunning-Fog Index,

readability of the questionnaire was determined to be at the 3.4 grade level. Questionnaires were then sent to a total of 267 individuals with a return of 111 for a response rate of 42%. Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), frequencies, percentage, and chi-squares were computed.

## Results

As indicated in Table 1, dropouts were mostly female and black with a relatively even distribution in age categories of < 20, 20-24, 25-29, and 30-39, but diminishing to 13% in the 40-49 category and 8% in the 50 and over category. Only 14% might be considered true ABE (i.e., less than eighth grade), while 30% had completed either eighth or ninth grade. Fifty-six percent had quit their formal education during high school. Four percent did not indicate how many years of school had been completed, and, in fact, of the 18 total variables only age received a response from all 111 subjects. Of the items suggesting reasons for dropout from the program (Table 2), "trouble getting to class" received the most affirmative responses (with 44%), while "needed more individual attention" was second with 28%. Of the GED completers, (17%) were under 20, with 11% in each of the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups. A third (34%) were between 30-39, with 11%

in their forties and 14% 50 or older. They also tended to be predominantly female and black. Only 3% were true ABE, with 45% at eighth or ninth grade and 52% who quit during high school. Completers, as expected, offered fewer items impeding their attendance, with "needed more individual attention" at 24%, and "classes at wrong time and day" at a mere 10%.

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

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## Discussion

What separates GED persisters from dropouts? Demographic variables seem to be, at best, a very small part of the answer. Expressed in percentages, older participants, females, and whites may have a slight edge in persistence; perhaps the biggest difference is that only 3% of the completers vs. 14% of the dropouts would be considered ABE. It is natural to infer that persistence in public school may relate to persistence in a GED program; equally, one may assume that higher level entry skills would contribute to satisfactory completion. Further, the fact that only 14% of the dropouts and 3% of the completers were ABE-level reinforces the view that this group is particularly difficult to attract into these programs.

Only five of the 14 survey items met the criteria for a chi-square test of independence; i.e., fewer than 20 percent of the cells had expected frequencies less than 5. Collapsing the categories of "sometimes" with "yes" did allow additional valid chi-squares on items 8, 9, 12, and 13. These items were analyzed using one degree of freedom and Yates Correction. The remaining items 2, 3, 5, 6, and 11 had low expected values after collapsing and still did not meet the criteria for the chi-square test of independence, and since the total number of subjects was greater than 30, Fisher's Exact Probability Test could not be used. Only "trouble getting to class" and "stopped due to illness" had significant chi-squares. "Work schedule" and "needed at home due to children" and "moved" were, however, more frequently cited by dropouts than by persisters. Interestingly, both groups cited the need for more individual attention which may well have implications for program planning and size. In both groups, the vast majority considered the classes neither too hard nor too easy. Overwhelmingly they did not consider the classes a waste of time and they liked the meeting place, the program ("class") itself, and the people. While there may be some Hawthorne effect inflating these positive findings, it bears repeating that the method employed was a mailed,

anonymous questionnaire rather than face-to-face interviews, in which the respondent's credibility might be more suspect. Further, the most common "optional comment" was to the effect that the student enjoyed the program and actually intended to return when circumstances allowed, echoing a very similar finding by Prins (1972). However, the possibility that those choosing to return the survey would be more favorably disposed toward the program than those who did not cannot be ignored.

The use of Cross's (1981) situational, institutional, and dispositional typology of barriers to participation in all adult educational settings appears to have applicability to attrition research in adult basic and secondary education. Scanlan and Darkenwald's (1984) further subdivision of "situational" barriers into work constraints, family constraints, and cost is a useful additional refinement which also was generally borne out in the present attrition study. (The exception here was "cost," which was not included in the survey because the ABSE programs were free, though hidden costs such as transportation or childcare might contribute to attrition). Dropouts indicated predominantly situational reasons for discontinuance, including "yes" or "sometimes" to "trouble getting to class" (63%), "needed at home due to children"

(43%), "worked changed or got job" (32%), "stopped due to my sickness (28%), and "moved" (16%). The major institutional barrier was the need for more individual attention, cited "yes" or "sometimes" by 43%, with "classes at wrong time or day" second at 27%. Dispositional reasons were led by "decided to study at home," but even here situational factors may be in evidence if this factor is related to the need to be with children and/or with moving. True dispositional factors such as "enjoyed class and people" received 15% "no" and "sometimes" responses while only 9% regarded the class as a "waste of time." Twenty-two percent of the dropouts felt the classes were at least sometimes too much like high school, but an even larger 27% of the completers did as well, suggesting that that is not the critical factor in GED completion. Generally, in fact, the completers cited the same problems as the dropouts did, though proportionately fewer of them did so (excepting the need for individual attention). Indeed, the differences were statistically significant only on "trouble getting to class," and "stopped due to sickness" which may suggest that other important differences may lie in internal motivational factors which the questionnaire did not probe.

Three major inferences from this discussion are plausible: (1) Situational barriers, over which the

institution and its representatives have little control, predominate in the dropouts' self-reported reasons for ABSE discontinuance; (2) If the need for greater individual attention can accurately be classified as an institutional barrier, programs which are more tutorial or small group-oriented should experience less attrition; and (3) research concerned with explaining attrition and persistence (rather than merely predicting it) must inevitably depend to some extent on the reported reasons of the dropouts and persisters themselves, a fact which may underrepresent dispositional factors, and possibly overrepresent situational and institutional ones. But ultimately, as long as adults have other responsibilities and obligations, and unless they see their educational experience as meeting their internal or external needs, attrition in adult basic and secondary education will continue to be a problem as well as a needed area of research.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Dropouts and GED Completers

| DEMOGRAPHIC DATA | COMPLETED GED | | DROPOUT | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | NUMBER | % | NUMBER |
| AGE | | 35 | | 76 |
| Less than 20 | 17 | | 22 | |
| 20-24 | 11 | | 22 | |
| 25-29 | 11 | | 17 | |
| 30-39 | 34 | | 17 | |
| 40-49 | 11 | | 13 | |
| Higher 50 & older | 14 | | 8 | |
| GENDER | | 32 | | 76 |
| Male | 13 | | 21 | |
| Female | 88 | | 79 | |
| RACE | | 32 | | 75 |
| Black | 53 | | 60 | |
| White | 47 | | 40 | |
| YR. SCHOOL | | 31 | | 73 |
| 7 or less | 3 | | 14 | |
| 8-9 | 45 | | 30 | |
| 10 or more | 52 | | 56 | |

TABLE 2

Percentage Response Distribution by Item for Dropouts and GED Completers

| ITEM | COMPLETED GED | | | | DROPOUT | | | | $X^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | NO | SOMETIMES | YES | NUMBER | NO | SOMETIMES | YES | NUMBER | |
| 1. Class Too Easy | 70 | 17 | 13 | 30 | 73 | 20 | 7 | 73 | 1.2 |
| 2. Class Too Hard | 86 | 14 | | 29 | 85 | 11 | 4 | 73 | |
| 3. Class Waste of Time | 93 | 7 | | 29 | 92 | 3 | 6 | 73 | |
| 4. Trouble Getting to Class | 79 | 10 | 10 | 29 | 36 | 19 | 44 | 72 | 15.9* |
| 5. Liked Meeting Place | 10 | | 90 | 29 | 7 | 10 | 84 | 73 | |
| 6. Enjoyed Class and People | 3 | | 97 | 30 | 8 | 7 | 85 | 75 | |
| 7. Needed at Home | 70 | 22 | 7 | 27 | 57 | 16 | 27 | 74 | 4.5 |
| 8. Classes (Wrong Time and Day)** | 83 | 7 | 10 | 30 | 73 | 11 | 16 | 73 | 0.8 |
| 9. Stopped Due to Sickness** | 93 | | 7 | 28 | 72 | 6 | 22 | 72 | 3.9* |
| 10. Work Schedule or Got Job | 90 | 3 | 7 | 29 | 68 | 5 | 27 | 74 | 3.7 |
| 11. Moved (Unable to go to Class) | 100 | | | 28 | 84 | | 16 | 74 | |
| 12. Classes Like High School** | 73 | 20 | 7 | 30 | 78 | 14 | 8 | 73 | 0.1 |
| 13. Decided to Study at Home** | 83 | | 17 | 29 | 77 | 7 | 16 | 73 | 0.2 |
| 14. Need More Indiv. Attention | 55 | 21 | 24 | 29 | 57 | 15 | 28 | 75 | 0.6 |

*Sig. at .05; items for which $X^2$ value is absent did not meet the conditions for the test.
**Items for which "sometimes" and "yes" were combined.